

review essays

studies of charles olson

CHARLES OLSON. *Call Him Ishmael*. By Paul Christensen. Austin & London. University of Texas Press. 1979. \$12.95. CHARLES OLSON. *The Scholar's Art*. By Robert Von Hallberg. Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1978. \$14.00. OLSON'S PUSH. *Origin, Black Mountain, and Recent American Poetry*. By Sherman Paul. Baton Rouge and London. Louisiana State University Press. 1978. \$14.95. A GUIDE TO THE MAXIMUS POEMS OF CHARLES OLSON. By George F. Butterick. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1978. \$40.00.

Charles Olson, the poet who died nearly eleven years ago, was a polymath in the tradition of Emerson—a writer with a strong sense of his moment in history and one who attempted to investigate all the major intellectual currents of his time. For the professional in anthropology, history, geology, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and more, Olson's poetry and essays provide an opportunity to see the work of specialists brought into the common marketplace of ideas and synthesized into an original and powerful vision of the American experience. This synthesis, Olson's education, and his unconventional career—"multidisciplinary" if ever a career was—ought to make him an emblematic poet for the field of American Studies.

The story of Olson's career is a very American one, yet it conforms to no familiar pattern. The son of a Swedish-American mother and an Irish-American father who worked for the Post Office, he was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, and raised in Gloucester, the town which is the setting and in many ways the subject of his three-volume *Maximus Poems*. He attended Wesleyan University and completed all course work for a Ph.D. in the American Civilization program at Harvard University when he left to become Assistant Chief of the Foreign Language Section in the Office of War Information in the Roosevelt Administration. Olson was apparently in line to become Postmaster General, but he was so dismayed by the rejoicing of party hacks, who

stood to benefit from the new patronage alignments when Roosevelt died, that he walked away from his political and governmental career.

He was thus thirty-five when he began as a poet. He published a handful of poems in conventional journals like the *Atlantic Monthly*, but as Robert Von Hallberg points out, his career is, judged by the usual norms, a series of strategic retreats. Having left the academic world, having foresworn politics, he now departed from the ordinary channels of communication and publication. He went to the Yucatan to study Mayan civilization, then began teaching at a small college in North Carolina. When Black Mountain College failed in 1955, he returned to Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he lived and wrote until his death in 1970, with the exception of brief terms as a teacher at SUNY-Buffalo and the University of Connecticut.

Charles Olson compels the interest of students of American intellectual history for several reasons. First, his ambitions were very large: he wrote with a sense of an American historical and artistic crisis that offered not only great dangers but also greater opportunities. He thus brought to his work a sense of urgency, as well as the resources of an exceptional intelligence and his excellent training and experience. (It should also be noted that he was an extraordinary personality with a magnetic ability to attract or repel others; becoming acquainted with his personality is a pleasure which transcends the themes of his work.) Olson did not believe with Auden that "poetry makes nothing happen"; he felt always that his work was essential and vital, and that others would come to see its significance.

Olson's experiences at Black Mountain were important because they gave him an opportunity to rethink certain issues of education and the organization of the intellectual disciplines. At the same time he came in contact with an extraordinary group of individuals: among his colleagues were the poets Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley, painters Joseph Albers and Franz Kline, musicians John Cage and David Tudor, the dancer Merce Cunningham and the mathematician Hans Rademacher. One product of the Black Mountain period is his proposal to reshape the curriculum into the four new "Sciences of Man":

It is not yet gauged how much the nature of knowledge has changed since 1875. Around that date men reapplied known techniques of the universe to man himself, and the change has made man as non-Socratic (or non-Aristotelian) as geometers of the early 19th century made the universe non-Euclidian.

Man as object and subject inquiries in a locus of space and time, is the premise, and so four disciplines are now clear as primary disciplines—

the *geo-*: object in space & time

the *bio-*: animals in space & time

the *archo-*: man as himself in space & time

That would be the outside. But man is the subject of himself, and so, inside, you get a fourth discipline (the psychological is merely included in it)—

the *mytho-*: subject animal man in his own space-time.

What is most striking here is Olson's sense that, first, experience must be examined by various methodologies and more important, there must be an intelligent coordination among the disciplines.

Although the subtlety with which Olson articulated his positions cannot be briefly described, the breadth of his vision can be sketched by reviewing three basic tenets. First, he believed that man has, in Heraclitus's phrase, "become estranged from what is most familiar," become alienated from his own essential nature. Second, he believed that what had been lost could be recovered by the study of history. This search pushed him ever back, to the pre-Socratics, to prehistory, to Pleistocene man. Third, he felt Americans are the "last first people," who are capable of redeeming the human condition. One might question whether mere literature is capable of serving in this process, but Olson insisted the poet was "the last pedagogue, to be trusted," and wrote with that office in mind. Experienced hands in American Studies tell me that this Emersonian stance connects with a good deal of the creative questing for synthesis in their field.

Olson's work presents two kinds of problems to the reader. First, his position is radically original; it cannot in its entirety be quickly digested. Moreover, it is presented in essays and poems that are themselves original in form: he is unquestionably an innovator who belongs in the company of Williams, Pound and Eliot. Second, his range of references is unconventional in two respects: it is highly esoteric and in intellectual disciplines outside the experience of most readers of poetry; and it is personal and autobiographical. Although it is sometimes remarked how quickly the great modernist authors like James Joyce passed from the underground to a prominent place in academic curricula, it remains to be seen whether Olson will do likewise. The books under review here are the first steps in a process the end of which is difficult to anticipate. Their approaches differ widely, but share a primarily literary orientation.

When Olson was a student under F.O. Matthiessen at Harvard, he began a study of *Moby-Dick* which culminated in a small book, *Call Me Ishmael*. Olson's thesis about Melville has now become Christensen's thesis about Olson: the hero in western civilization has been an Ahab who opposes himself to nature, but a newer hero is now necessary; one who, like Ishmael, does not oppose nature but rather participates in and aligns himself with it. Christensen's book points to the underlying unity in Olson's career and traces the evolution of a single insight which Olson first expressed in a book of literary criticism (one which T.S. Eliot rejected for British publication as "too American a book") through the early poetry and essays, culminating in *The Maximus Poems*. Although the handling of literary history is weak—especially in the treatment of Olson's formative influences, the intellectual milieu of his early career and his influence on subsequent poets—Christensen's approach is useful for tracing the thread of Olson's central argument and in providing exegeses and background for some difficult texts.

Robert Von Hallberg's book is strongest where Christensen's is weakest. He begins by observing that Olson's poems are distinctly dif-

ferent from the sort which can be appreciated by the prevailing standards of criticism; he then explicates the poetic theory which Olson himself expressed and implied in his poems and theoretical statements. (Indeed, poetics as an area of study and research has been revitalized partly by the practices and theory of the Black Mountain writers.) Von Hallberg's study is consistently sensitive to the issues which Olson's verse practice raises and which have altered the practice of his contemporaries and successors. (It also deals usefully with Olson's politics and political background.) Olson's poetry is frequently didactic and expository in an unconventional manner, and readers accustomed to a poetry of self-expression, irony and cultivated sensibility will find it often unappealing. In confronting this issue, Von Hallberg has contributed a valuable chapter to the history of recent American poetry. He cannot, however, follow Olson through the final *Maximus* poems, where the vision, though still political, becomes more personal and individual. In rejecting the later work, Von Hallberg offers only a partial portrait of Olson.

Sherman Paul's study of Olson is committed to a view of the poet's development as continuous and organic, and he thus gives the most comprehensive account of the transformations and growth of Olson's thought. The method is essentially *explication de texte*: the careful examination of selected passages with an eye to their meaning, to their relation to the entire oeuvre and to Olson's life, and finally to their place in the American literary tradition. Paul is an experienced scholar of American literature, and his estimation of Olson's significance and achievement places Olson among the masters. His book lacks the expository straightforwardness of the others, but it probably contains the most careful and thorough interpretation of the work.

George Butterick's *Guide to the Maximus Poems* is a different sort of book from the others and represents the latest accomplishment by the curator of the Olson collection at the University of Connecticut. Since Olson's death, Butterick (sometimes with Charles Boer) has edited and published several important lectures, essays and poems by Olson, including the third volume of *The Maximus Poems*. This *Guide*, which identifies "names of persons and places, foreign words and phrases, and supplies the precise sources of the many literary and historical allusions and borrowings," is a well-executed reference book, and it includes a useful chronology of Olson's life.

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